



MIT's Tod Machover incorporates traffic noise and random conversations into his new work

THE ARGUMENT

Found Sounds

The musical visionary Tod Machover has crowd-sourced a symphony for Toronto, and now other cities want one, too

BY SUE CARTER FLINN

In early 2011, Peter Oundjian, the music director for the Toronto Symphony Orchestra, enlisted Tod Machover to compose a piece for this year's New Creations Festival, a week dedicated to contemporary orchestral music. The theme for 2013's event is technology and the orchestra, and Oundjian wanted something that wouldn't have been possible a decade ago. The 59-year-old Machover is a Boston-based musical innovator who believes that with the right technology, even those who skipped the childhood ritual of piano lessons or who are cursed with a tin ear can create a piece worthy of a concert hall. He came up with an ambitious plan to merge public

contributions into an orchestral composition. It's called *A Toronto Symphony*, and it premieres this month—a half-hour piece that incorporates thousands of sounds submitted by ordinary Torontonians, sounds that are meant to represent everyday experiences of the city.

It's the kind of idea most would abandon at the "Wouldn't it be cool..." stage. Machover, however, is a true believer. As a professor of music and tech at the MIT Media Lab, a playground for interdisciplinary researchers, Machover has dedicated his life to the idea of making composition and

performance accessible to the masses. "Creativity isn't something just for geniuses or some small number of people," he says. He's a sought-after speaker who can deliver a rapid-fire TED talk with the assuredness of Malcolm Gladwell and the geeky intensity of Bill Gates. He invented Hyperscore, a software program that allows amateurs to compose music using colour-coded

graphics. Yo-Yo Ma, Prince and Peter Gabriel have employed Machover-engineered Hyperinstruments, which allow performers to create multi-layered sounds normally available only in the studio. For the

MUSIC
A TORONTO SYMPHONY
BY TOD MACHOVER
PERFORMED BY THE TSO
MARCH 9
ROY THOMPSON HALL

PHOTOGRAPH BY MARK PETERHEINZ

magicians Penn and Teller, he built a special Hyperinstrument-enhanced chair that made music based on the movements of the person sitting in it. Machover is also the granddaddy of *Guitar Hero*, which employs technology that came out of his MIT lab.

His creative evangelism is bred in the bone: his first music teacher was his mother, a Juilliard-trained pianist who encouraged him to create tunes using the sounds of household objects. His father was a pioneer in computer graphics. Machover first got

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to know Toronto in the '70s while serving as principal cellist in the Canadian Opera Company's touring orchestra—he would drive up from New York, where he was studying composition. Over the past few decades, ensembles around the world, including the London Sinfonietta, the Los Angeles Philharmonic, the Houston Grand Opera and the Kronos Quartet, have commissioned work from him. (As did the renowned Tokyo String Quartet, for which Oundjian once served as first violinist.) His most recent opera, *Death and the Powers*, employed a chorus of robots and an animated stage, and was a finalist for the 2012 Pulitzer Prize.

After beginning work on the new symphony, Machover went public last spring with a small series of challenges posted on the project's website, Twitter page and Facebook page, asking the public for samples of recognizable city noises. He received hundreds of examples of subway chimes, streetcar screeches and construction sounds. He also went on fact-finding walking tours of the city, making field recordings in Cherry Beach, the Distillery District and Chinatown and on the TTC. (He worked with members of the TSO to convert many of the sounds into musical notation; others have been incorporated as is into the final work to add texture and colour.)

Throughout the fall, he uploaded brief sections of the piece into a group of web applications designed by the MIT Media

Lab that allow anyone to manipulate sounds simply by moving the mouse around on the screen. The apps are as user-friendly and addictive as *Angry Birds*. In a series of YouTube videos demonstrating how they work and encouraging people to make and upload their own versions of the partial symphony, Machover comes off like a kids' show host who is just as psyched to play with the software as he hopes everyone else is.

As he was collecting ideas, he also released teaser clips of the piece. *A Toronto Symphony* isn't quite the musical equivalent of a walk down Yonge, but there's no mistaking its Machoverian enthusiasm: the main melody is lively enough to stand in as an Olympics theme song. One section combines flurries of atonal melodies played by the strings with the noise of a tennis match, people cheering on a baseball team, burbling water and, amusingly, a male voice intoning, "Walk sign is on for all crossings"—the sound of the city's pedestrian scrambles.

"It's both fabulous and quite insane," Oundjian says of Machover's creation. "Only Tod would even think you could create a symphony from thousands of little ideas that come to you via the Internet." A number of other cities have already approached Machover about creating their own versions of *A Toronto Symphony*. He expects Boston, Edinburgh and Perth, Australia, to premiere grand-scale, crowd-sourced musical works beginning as early as this summer, with more to follow.

Bach is alleged to have said there is nothing remarkable about being able to play a keyboard—you just hit the keys and the instrument plays itself. Composing a symphony, however, isn't really something that can be left in the hands of people who can't tell an adagio from an allegro. Machover himself acknowledges that creating a memorable piece of music is a rare feat. He also doesn't expect apps or robots to replace the piano teachers. "You don't want machines taking over—there are still wonderful things we can do face to face, thank God," he says. "But if we can shape the technology to allow us to extend our abilities, that's pretty magical." The Toronto experiment demonstrates that our most precious creative resource is not necessarily crowds of eager, iPhone-wielding amateurs, but rather a few utopian-minded geniuses like Machover who believe there are better and more fun ways to make music than sitting alone in a room.

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